PORTRAIT 68,

Observation point

By Avraham Vofsi

See through me

Rebecca Ray

The last word

Unpacked

Hard truths

By Penelope Grist and

By Dr David Hansen

By Rebecca Ray

By Jennifer Higgie

Weaving identity

By Rebecca Ray

By Elspeth Pitt

Paper weight

Portrait story

all at once

You, looking at me

By Joanna Gilmour

By Vincent Fantauzzo

By Bradley Vincent

By Joanna Gilmour

MORE ISSUES OF

Off her own bat

PORTRAIT

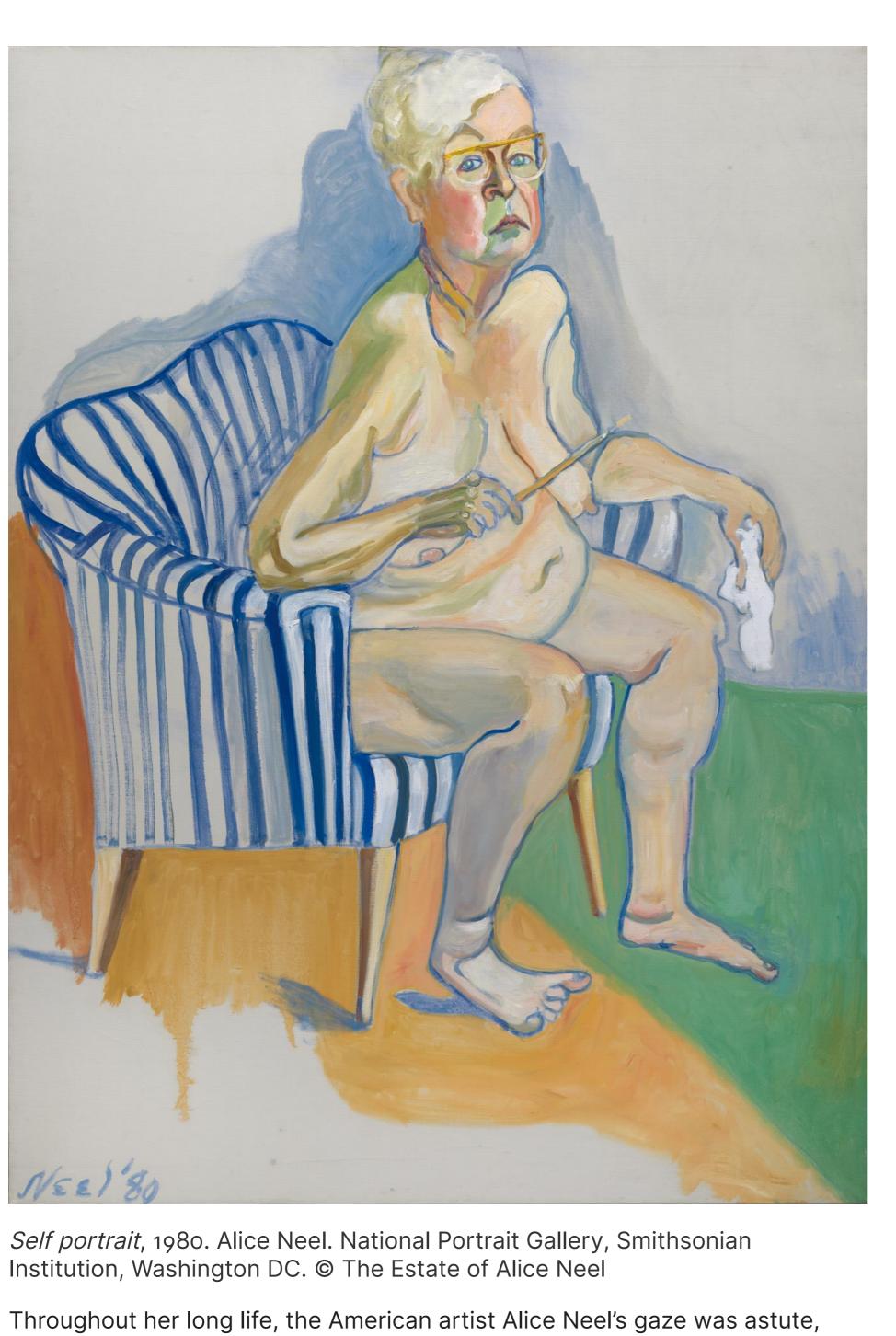
MAGAZINE

Everything, everyqueer,

SUMMER 2022/23

HARD TRUTHS

by Jennifer Higgie, 7 December 2022



only rarely painted herself. 'I tried to capture life as it went by – art records so much, the feeling, the beliefs, the changes,' she wrote. In 1980, at the age of eighty, however, she unveiled a self portrait. Naked in the striped, blue chair

unsentimental and compassionate. She documented seemingly everyone she

children and other people's, family, friends; couples, be they gay, straight or

transgender; workers, writers, artists, students, homeless men and women,

feminists, performers, poets, pregnant women, shrinks and singers – but she

came into contact with: her lovers, her neighbours in New York City, her

where so many of her friends had sat before her, as with all of her portraits flattery played no part in her vision: her belly is swollen and her breasts sag, but her expression is direct and unabashed. One of the many startling things about this painting is its reminder of how rarely - especially in museums - we see images of women comfortable in their skin. In a culture that worships at the altar of youth, Neel looks at us, grey haired and bespectacled, unselfconscious about her lack of clothing. One hand brandishes a paintbrush, while the other holds a rag. The composition hums with life: the bright green and orange floor, the jaunty blue of the chair and the light-filled room are as vital as the woman herself. Neel worked on the picture for five years. 'Frightful, isn't it?' she said in a 1983 Artforum interview. 'I love it. At least it shows a certain revolt against everything decent.' Although she died almost four decades ago, Neel's muscular, vivid portraits or, as she preferred to call them, 'pictures of people' – are as relevant, as moving and as influential as ever. 'I have painted life itself right off the vine,' she said, 'not a copy of an old master with new figures inserted - because now is now.' Her concern for her fellow humans – many of them migrants, working class, or ostracised because of their race, gender or sexual orientation – ran deep in her veins but it wasn't something that she observed coolly from a distance. Despite her great capacity for joy, tragedy and hardship marred her life: she endured the death of two of her children, two suicide attempts, abusive relationships, poverty and decades of being ignored by the art establishment.

later she remembered: 'Being born I looked around the world and its people fascinated and terrified me.' After working as a clerk for three years and studying art at night school, she enrolled in the fine art program at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. She discovered she had the two qualities she deemed essential for the life she intended to live: 'You know what it takes to be an artist? Hypersensitivity and the will of the devil. To never give up.' In 1925, after a brief courtship, she married the Cuban painter, Carlos Enríquez. The couple moved to Havana, but it was a struggle for Neel to balance the demands of her husband's disapproving parents and her work an artist. She and Carlos would walk the streets, looking for people to paint. Beggars, Havana, Cuba (1926) is an intimation of the power of her portraits to come: a study of a stooped and veiled old woman sitting beside a man who holds himself erect, it's a portrait of pride and resilience, not deprivation.

Born in 1900, the fourth of five children in an impoverished middle-class

family in Pennsylvania, she liked to pronounce: 'I am the century.' Decades

Margaret Evans Pregnant, 1978 Alice Neel. Institute of Contemporary Art,

The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner. Photo Kerry McFate

Boston. Gift of Barbara Lee. The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women. ©

Within a year the couple had relocated to New York City where their daughter

Santillana was born in 1926; tragically, she died of diphtheria just before her

first birthday. Neel soon gave birth to her second child, Isabetta, but in 1930,

attempted suicide and was hospitalised for a year. When she started painting

again, she made countless pictures of pregnant women, mothers and children

- subjects she would return to again and again. Degenerate Madonna (1930)

is a nightmarish study of a mother, as pale as death with distended nipples,

holding an equally pale child with a swollen head in a white robe; beside

them, a spectre of another child floats in the ether. In Childbirth (1939), a

naked woman lies in bed, her limbs askew, her face a blank mask of pain.

Decades later, in Margaret Evans Pregnant (1978), Neel captured the blunt

reality of pregnancy; Margaret is clearly uncomfortable as she perches on the

chair nude, her distended belly bulging with twins. Whereas many of her later

portraits throb with life and optimism, her early images are raw, shot through

with grief. In 1934, she painted a still-controversial, full-frontal portrait of her

estranged daughter: five-year-old Isabetta stares out at us, her hands on her

hips, fierce in her nakedness – a state that, to Neel's thinking, we can assume

was far less brutal than other forms of exposure. Nakedness, for Neel, was

simply an aspect of being human.

Carlos returned to Cuba, taking their child with him. Neel was devastated,

In 1932, in New York, Neel took part in six exhibitions; she also shared an apartment in Greenwich Village with her new lover, a drug addict and sailor named Kenneth Doolittle. In her 1931 portrait of him, he's a threatening figure: his face ashen and skeletal, his eyes stern; his red tie like the slash of a knife

wound against his brown suit, his walking stick gripped like a weapon. Her

vision was prescient. In 1934, in a jealous rage, Doolittle destroyed around 300 of Neel's watercolours, paintings and drawings by attacking and burning them. 1 Peggy, c. 1949. Collection of James Kenyon, Los Angeles, California. © The Estate of Alice Neel and of L.A. Louver, Venice, California. Photo Malcolm Varon. 2 Nazis Murder Jews, 1936. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © The Estate of Alice Neel and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. Both Alice Neel. A year earlier, in 1933, Neel had been one of the first artists to be hired for the Works Progress Administration. A Government initiative headed by President Roosevelt's advisor, Harry Hopkins, it provided employment to millions of Americans during the Great Depression. Neel, who was penniless, was remunerated for creating a painting every six weeks: the financial

security was life changing. Dedicated to social realism, her work of the 1930s

workers, demonstrations, the poor and marginalised. In 1935, Neel became a

member of the Communist Party – she was loyal to it, in varying degrees, for

the rest of her life. The FBI opened a file on her in 1951 and they interviewed

her twice. Neel explained that: 'I joined the Party several times. But you know

am, I'm an anarchic humanist.' While her work grew in nuance and complexity,

her rage against injustice blazes out in paintings such as Nazis Murder Jews

(1936), which depicts a crowd of protestors brandishing an anti-Nazi placard

a victim of domestic abuse who later died of a drug overdose, Neel's

as if to fend off the sadness.

and Communist flags. In Peggy (c. 1949), a haunting portrait of her neighbour,

compassion is clear. Peggy looks beyond us, deep in herself, her arms raised,

what? I'm not a bureaucrat, by nature. I hate bureaucrats. You know what I

and 1940s focused on class struggle: she portrayed union leaders and

The Spanish Family, 1943 Alice Neel. Estate of Alice Neel. © The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner. Photo Malcolm Varon Alongside her more overtly political work, Neel was never coy in either her depictions of bodies or of her sexual relationships. In 1935, she painted herself with a new lover and lifelong supporter and friend, John Rothschild, variously naked, urinating, and anxious. In the late 1930s, she moved from Greenwich Village to the poverty-stricken Spanish Harlem where, in 1938, she painted a self portrait Alice and José: she is asleep, entwined with her

boyfriend, the Puerto Rican musician José Santiago Negrón, with whom, in

1939, she had a son, Neel Santiago. (He later changed his name to Richard

Carlos' painful recovery following invasive surgery (T.B. Harlem); in a later

resolute (The Spanish Family, 1943). When José abandoned Neel three

months after she had given birth, she began a relationship with the

often volatile.

portrait, Neel depicts Carlos' wife Margarita and their children, dignified and

Communist photographer and filmmaker, Sam Brody. In 1941, they, too, had a

hand-to-mouth: on welfare, occasionally teaching and accepting money from

friends. Unable to afford a studio, she painted people in her small apartment,

mouth, their expression and posture. In one interview, she explained: 'I love to

son, Hartley Neel, but Brody was often absent and, when he was at home,

The WPA funding ran out in 1943, and for over ten years Neel lived from

endlessly exploring what she described as her 'over-weening interest in

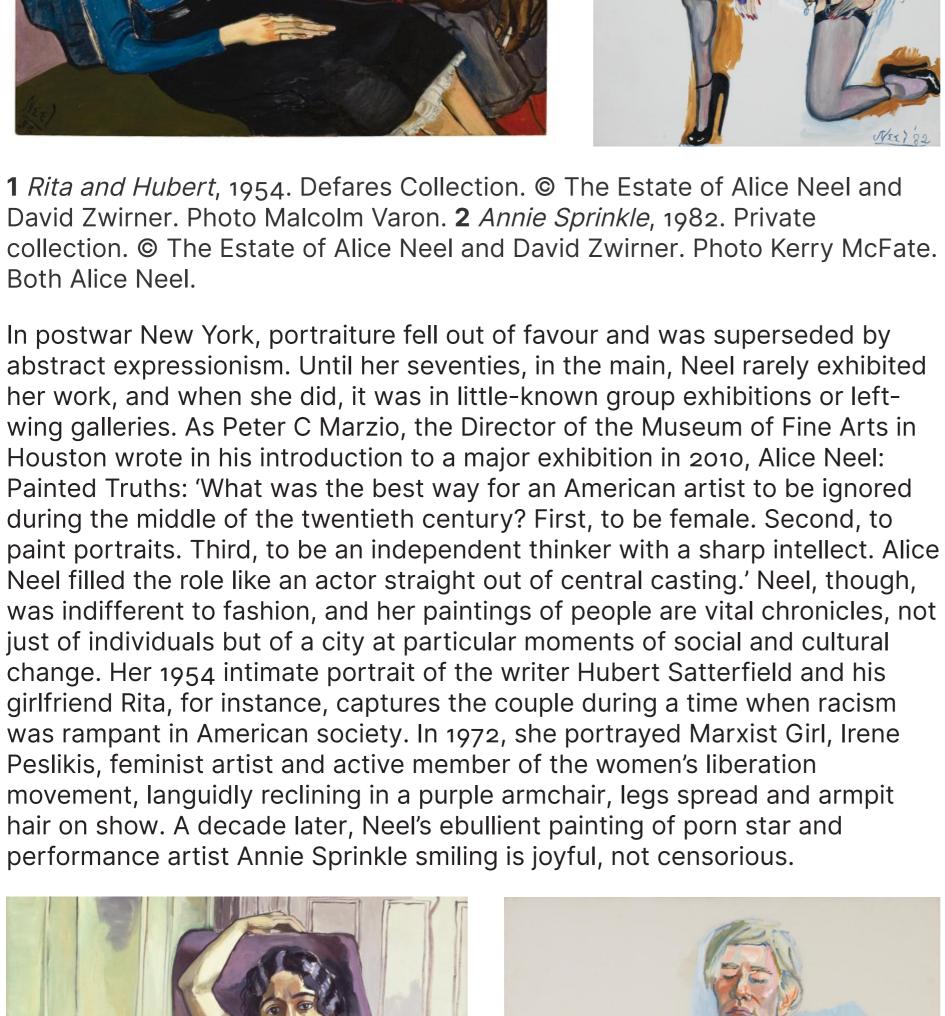
brushstroke reveals something unique about her sitter: the slant of their

humanity'. She looked at faces and bodies long and hard and each

see what the pressure of life does to the human psyche.'

Neel.) Tuberculosis was rife in Harlem, and in 1940 she painted José's brother

Alice Neel, 1944. Sam Brody. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York. © Sam Brody In 1944, Brody photographed Neel, small, pale and intense, surrounded by her paintings. She is workmanlike in a checked shirt, neat hair and loafers. She sits cross-legged, her expression weary, quizzical. The painted faces around her jostle for attention; the walls seem too small, the ceiling too low to contain

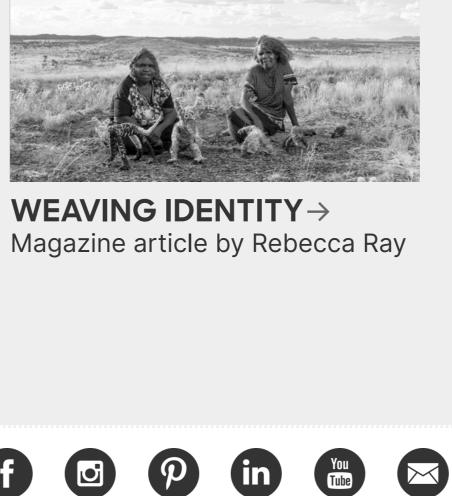


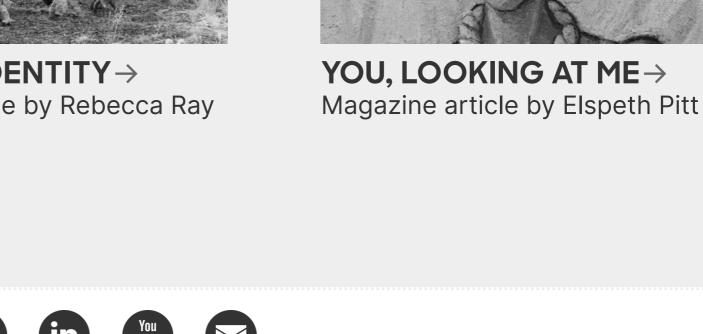


By Jennifer Higgie

RELATED INFORMATION







recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present. We respectfully advise that this site includes works by, images of, names of, voices of and references to deceased people.

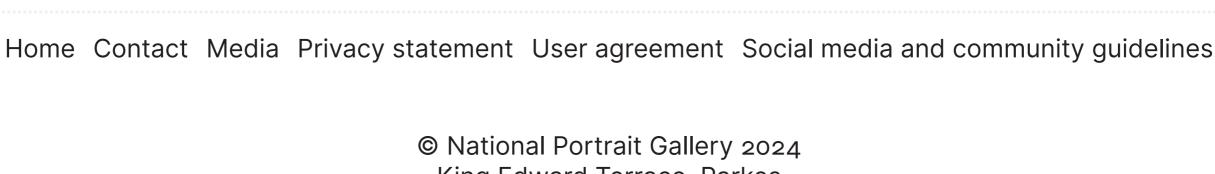
This website comprises and contains copyrighted materials and works. Copyright in all materials and/or works comprising or contained within this website remains with the National Portrait Gallery and other copyright owners as specified. The National Portrait Gallery respects the artistic and intellectual property rights of others. The use of images of works of art reproduced on this website and all other content may be restricted under the Australian Copyright Act

King Edward Terrace, Parkes Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia The National Portrait Gallery acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and

1 Marxist Girl, Irene Peslikis, 1972. Daryl and Steven Roth. © The Estate of Alice Neel, David Zwirner and Victoria Miro. 2 Andy Warhol, 1970. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Timothy Collins. © The Estate of Alice Neel. Photo © 2022. Digital image Whitney Museum of American Art / 'made it' at 74 – only ten years before she died. Now, she believed, she finally 'had the right to paint'. Thinking back over her life, she said: 'I do not know if the truth that I have told will benefit the world in any way. I managed to do it at great cost to myself and perhaps to others. It is hard to go against the tide of one's time, milieu and position. But at least I tried to reflect innocently the twentieth century and my feelings and perceptions as a girl and a woman.'



Alice Neel quotes are from Phoebe Hoban's biography Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty (2010), Alice Neel: Painted Truths (2010) and Alice Neel, A Documentary (2007) directed by Andrew Neel.



Phone +61 2 6102 7000 ABN: 54 74 277 1196

1968 (Cth). Requests for a reproduction of a work of art or other content can be made through a Reproduction

<u>request</u>. For further information please contact <u>NPG Copyright</u>.

The National Portrait Gallery is an Australian Government Agency

everything she has to say, every complex feeling she is trying to express. Her empathy with her subjects was such that, describing her painting process in historical footage shown in her grandson Andrew Neel's 2007 documentary, she said: 'I go so out of myself and into them that after they leave, I sometimes feel horrible. I feel like an untenanted house.'